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THE MYSTERIOUS GREAT

BY ELWORTH POUND

An immense human head on the body of an animal rising out of the earth to which it is perfectly proportioned, gazing inscrutably to the East, the Sphinx propounds a riddle to all who visit it and is said to devour those who cannot answer its: Whence came I? Whither do I go? How? Why?

Maybe those who cannot answer that question, however rich they be, however powerful or heroic or influential, are devoured. Who can tell? In the last analysis, after everything has been accomplished, the honors won, the goals gained, the successes verified, after we have busily rendered what we consider to be our iota of service, what remains? Just, rest? Oblivion? Nirvana? A holiday with angels? What?

The puzzle has confounded many; all try in some manner to answer it; in spite of the blind rush of commercial America, it is the one question which must be asked—and answered. Otherwise, a Sphinx of thoughtless greed and futile ambitions may devour the heart that is ours.

Of course we are answering it volcanically, in our subconscious, hidden, fundamental selves that seeth along for years without our knowledge only to burst forth the lava of some achievement we knew as little about and were as unaware of as San Francisco was of its physical earthquake before it happened. The war was an evidence of this; something many of us believed mentally to be impossible was an emotional primitive certainty before we knew what had happened. And we are not yet over the surprise and shock of it.

If we could be more certain of events—if we could be more certain of ourselves, we would be closer to the master and further from the slave; knowing ourselves more intensely we could be in conscious harmony with the forces

driving us, we could be ready for the earthquakes. If we could answer the How and Why—we in time could be the How and Why! That is why the question is so important.

A solution is possible. The question has been answered. There is a group of men in the world who not only claim to have discovered the riddle of the Sphinx but who modestly admit possessing the power of Life. Most of these men travel under no name; a few call themselves mystics. All of them are *overwhelmed* with their discovery; most of them want to impart their possession to their fellows. None of them quite knows how to do it. They say that the thing they have come into is so consuming that when they try to tell of it, it is like a dumb man endeavoring to describe the taste of some sweet food. At best he can only intimate that it is 'sweet'; the Taste he can put neither in words nor gestures.

This power, according to Richard Maurice Bucke in his book *Cosmic Consciousness*, has been the possession of every great man in the history of the world. He lists them, one after another: Moses, Gautama the Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, Paul, Plotinus, Dante, Pascal, Spinoza, Behren, Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, etc., and shows that they all underwent the same spiritual development, exhibited the same symptoms in similar manners and at similar ages, and achieved in varying degrees somewhat the same results. His book deals only with the first step, the coming into the "cosmic consciousness."

Says Bucke: Like a flash there is presented to his [the subject's] consciousness a clear conception (a vision) in outline of the meaning and drift of the universe. He does not come to believe merely; but he sees and knows that the cosmos, which to the self-conscious mind seems to be made up of dead matter, is in fact far otherwise—is in very truth a living presence. He sees that instead of men being, as it were, patches of life scattered through an infinite sea of non-living substance, they are in reality specks of relative death in an infinite ocean of life. He sees that the life which is in man is eternal, as all life is eternal; that the soul of man is as immortal as God is; that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all; that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love, and that the happiness of every individual is in the long run absolutely certain. The person who passes through this experience will learn in the few minutes, or even moments, of its continuance more than in months or of years of study, and he will learn much that no study ever taught or can teach. Especially does he obtain such a conception of The Whole, or at least of an immense

Whole, as dwarfs all conception, imagination, or speculation, springing from and belonging to ordinary self-consciousness, such a conception as makes the old attempts to mentally grasp the universe and its meaning petty and even ridiculous.

This "illumination" which almost always occurs between the ages of thirty and forty is only the first step, the rebirth into what for the initiates is the world of reality. From then on, growth begins. "Except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of Heaven."

Of course this is hard doctrine to preach. Those who have experienced any form of an "illumination" will know that it is (for them) true. Those who eat and sleep and struggle on the plane of the body will scoff at it as so much unproved and therefore unreliable emotionalizing. They will say that in certain religious, sentimental temperaments the feelings run away with the mind with the result that the person, superstitious, will believe in all sorts of things from ghosts to God. They will tell you that God is all right in his place, but that his place is the laboratory of the "scientist."

The believer replies that "Science" is only an evolution of old magic, that it has little basis in truth because, working only with the reasoning brain which is an almost irrelevant key to the lock of Knowledge, it can know little of what Truth is. He will refer you to the mathematics, the chemistry, astrology, of the ancient Indians, Persians, Egyptians, pointing out that without reason those races ferreted out more of the "scientific" secrets that perplex man than the surface brains of modern wise men have been able to conceive. He will say that in bridges or skyscrapers or subways no vestige of happiness, of wisdom, of "God," will ever be found. He will admit that these "modern improvements" are well enough in their place but he will say that their place certainly is subsidiary. He will tell you that in a moment he can fly spiritually farther and faster than the speediest airplane can transport one bodily in a day. He will suggest casually that matter does not matter because there is no such thing. He will say that there can be nothing deeper in life than one's individual appreciation of Life, and that this appreciation is intensified and perfected not primarily by accomplishments, not by objective activity, but by subjective, introspective, if you will, experience. He will remark with "A. E." (George Rus-

sell) that "sitting in your chair you can travel farther than Columbus travelled and to lordier lands than his eyes had rested on."

For the illuminate a new life begins, a life within himself. All of his past existence becomes a sort of divine analogy; a new struggle commences but it is the struggle of the soul upwards to—God. The interest no longer centers in material things; the power may be used in a great cause which becomes solely material, but the power itself, not the achievement, is of import. The rebirth accomplished, the subject sees the universe with new eyes, his old measure of values vanish, his words and actions are continually colored by the spiritual experience he has undergone, he is no longer of Caesar's world.

Granted the abnormality of persons who undergo such an experience, nevertheless the experience in itself is of such terrific force that it behooves even the most close minded of us to give it our incidental attention. Surely it is worthy of "investigation."

Bucke lays down ten criteria of experience that the illumined exhibit. 1. The subjective light. At the moment of illumination the subject often feels himself enveloped in a flame or rose colored light or aura which surrounds him. 2. A moral elevation. A feeling of rising above love and hate in the ordinary implication of the terms and coming into another love, similar to that felt by artists and poets when they are creatively expressing themselves. 3. An intellectual illumination. The subject *sees* the Whole of the Universe, or comprehends its inherent unity or oneness, for the first time. 4. The sense of immortality. Feeling this oneness, the concept of life and death drops away; only the living heart of things, the *élan vital*, exists. With this feeling comes: 5. The loss of the fear of death. And: 6. The loss of the sense of sin. 7. The illumination is always instantaneous and sudden. 8. The previous character of the subject, intellectual, moral, and physical, undoubtedly is a factor. 9. A tremendous charm or magnetism is added to the personality, and: 10. The experience is of such intensity as to "transfigure the subject" to the extent that the change is visibly noticeable by others. It is then that a man comes into his real power and force.

As a specific example of just what this "illumination" is, it might be well to quote from one of the many cases

listed. Horace Traubel, biographer of Walt Whitman, gives as clear a testimony of the experience as any perhaps. He writes: . . . "That overwhelming night, as I leaned over the railing of the ferryboat, I lost this world for another, and in the anguish and joy of a few minutes saw things heretofore withheld from me revealed. Those who have had such an encounter will understand what this means, others will not or will perhaps only realize it by intimation. I could not separate the physical and spiritual of that moment. My physical body went through the experience of a disappearance in spiritual light. All severe lines in the front of phenomena relaxed. I was one with God, love, the Universe, arrived at last face to face with myself. I was sensible of peculiar mental and moral disturbances and readjustments. There was an immediateness to it all—an indissoluble unity of the several energies of my being in one force. I was no more boating it on a river than winging it in space or taking star leaps, a traveller from one to another of the peopled orbs. While I stood there the boat had got into the slip and was almost ready to go out again. A deckhand who knew me came up and tapped me on the shoulder. . . . I did not see Walt till the next day, evening. In the meantime I had lived through twenty-four hours of ecstasy mixed with some doubt as to whether I had not had a crack in the skull and gone mad rather than fallen under some light and made a discovery. But the first words Walt addressed to me when I sallied into his room were reassuring: "Horace, you have the look of great happiness on your face to-night. Have you had a run of good luck?" I sat down and tried in a few words to indicate that I had had a run of good luck, though not perhaps the good luck he had in mind for me at the moment. He did not seem at all surprised at what I told him, merely remarking, as he put his hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes: "I knew it would come to you." I suggested: "I have been wondering all day if I am not crazy." He laughed gravely: "No, sane. Now at last you are sane."

And turning to Walt's *Leaves of Grass*!

When I undertake to tell the best I find I cannot,
My tongue is ineffectual on its pivots,
My breath will not be obedient to its organs,
I become a dumb man.

And in his *Prayer of Columbus*:

O I am sure they really come from Thee!
 The urge, the ardor, the unconquerable will,
 The potent, felt, interior command, stronger than words,
 A message from the Heavens, whispering to me even in sleep,
 These speed me on.

.....
 One effort more—my altar this bleak sand:
 That Thou, O God, my life has blighted,
 With ray of light, steady, ineffable, vouchsafed of Thee,
 (Light rare, untellable—lighting the very light!
 Beyond all signs, descriptions, languages!)
 For that, O God—be it my latest word—here on my knees,
 Old, poor, and paralyzed—I thank Thee.

My terminus near,
 The clouds already closing in upon me,
 The voyage balk'd—the course disputed, lost,
 I yield my ships to Thee.

.....
 And, turning to the words of Christ — But each word
 of his, whose power was not in but through words, burns
 with the supreme illumination! Sometimes he called it his
 "Father," sometimes "the Light," sometimes "Me:"

Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,
 And I will give you rest.
 Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me:
 For I am meek and lowly in heart:
 And ye shall find rest unto your souls.
 For my yoke is easy,
 And my burden is light.

The reality only can be suggested. Great poetry tries to put it in words, great deeds suggest it, we can hear it in the silences. But the experience is tremendous and personal. It must come to each man personally before he can know it. It may not be spoken, it may only be spoken about. It has been called Brahma, Vishnu, the Tao, the Li, That, Om, the Word, God, Catholicism. It has rung through every age and every century with a compelling clarity that has swept all before it. Where "It" has evinced itself, has been the fire of great accomplishment. It has been of such terrific force as to leave in its wake thousands and millions of persons who not understanding later have bowed down to It irreverently, who have become ossified in dogma, creed, ritual, fear, and all manner of religions because they could only achieve a small and much perverted fragment of It for

themselves. And yet who shall say that that fragment, that belief, that religion small and narrow and beclouding as it may be, is worse than no belief at all? Disbelief is necessary; Its power runs through heretics and supporters alike; yet all must have a faith. This faith whatever it is, this belief, this It, is all that exists. Without it, life is lethargy, with it life is something dynamic at least, moving, compelling, real. It is not that men will not believe. There is an urge within the most intellectual scientist that goads him on and on. It is that men will not yet believe enough. When they believe enough they will believe *all the way*. Past time and space as important concepts in themselves. Past the mere accumulation of money or properties. Past pleasures and bank accounts. Even past friends, possessions, selfishness. Certainly past churches. Past blind obeisance to any creed or man. Past all things to oneself. Past reasoned impractical concepts to the heart of energy, to the burning vitalizing efficient life force, to It. Then that age will at last be practical in the truest sense of the word.

Schelling in his *Philosophical Letters upon Dogmatism and Criticism* says:

In all of us there dwells a secret marvelous power of freeing ourselves from the changes of time, of withdrawing to our secret selves away from external things, and of so discovering to ourselves the eternal in us in the form of unchangeability. This presentation of ourselves to ourselves is the most truly personal experience, upon which depends everything that we know of the supra-sensible world. This presentation shows us for the first time what real existence is, whilst all else only appears to be. It differs from every presentation of the sense in its perfect freedom, whilst all other presentations are bound, being overweighted by the burden of the object. . . . This intellectual presentation occurs when we cease to be our own object, when, withdrawing into ourselves, the perceiving image merges in the self-perceived. At that moment we annihilate time and duration of time: we are no longer in time, but time, or rather eternity itself (the timeless) is in us. The external world is no longer an object for us, but is lost in us.

Again, the same thing, although Schelling must put it not in the language of the poet but in that of the scholar. But it is the experience, not the phrases that matter. In the works of the greatest writers, somewhere *always* the testimony is found. The greater the volume, the more we may have to hunt it out; when a man's literary output is limited it may usually be found on every page, depending naturally

upon the strength of the illumination. It is in the accomplishments of all our religious teachers, even as a fragment of it is expressed in our Roosevelts and D'Annunzios. It is in each of us.

With the acceptance of the mystical experience comes a new appraisal of current spiritistic, psychic, telepathic, clairvoyant, new thought, phenomena. It is a casual appraisal for the true mystic is well aware of the real force of the universe and cannot be surprised by any trivial manifestations of this force. For him there is something far greater than talking with dead relatives, or reading inconsequential thoughts that one's friends may happen to have, or deciphering the mind, or locating the burial spots of personal treasures of gold or health, or teasing oneself into the knowledge that one is strong enough to sell a hundred boxes of shoes more each year or powerful enough not to get "sick" when consuming meat poisons three times daily. The mystic is interested in none of these things. They still savor too much of the material world; too often they are only the selfish cravings of centered people for more selfhood. Far too seldom are they first steps towards the goal of reality.

Such "spiritualistic" waves come after the close of periods of deep suffering on the part of nations or individuals. With ten million killed by the World War we can well expect an advent of what will be considered falsely by some as the spiritual awakening of the universe. Already it is upon us. The mystic with the materialistic will hold up his hands in horror as the "fad" again strikes the Western world, germinates, flourishes, and dies.

And yet out of any of these movements, as indeed out of any experience in life, can come a close approach to the more permanent, realer thing. So, for instance, in the automatic writing of Mrs. Holland the Myers control speaks:

If it were possible for the soul to die back into life again, I should die from sheer yearning to reach you—to tell you that all that we imagined is not half wonderful enough for the truth. . . . If I could only reach you—if I could only tell you—I long for power and all that comes to me is an infinite yearning—an infinite pain. Does any of this reach you—reach any one—or am I only wailing as the wind wails—wordless and unheeded?

And again:

We no more solve the riddle of Death by dying than we solve the

problem of Life by being born. Take my own case. I was always a seeker—until it seemed at times as if the quest was more to me than the prize. Only the attainments of my search were generally like rainbow gold alway beyond and afar—It is not all clear—I seek still—only with a confirmed optimism more perfect and beautiful than any we imagined before—I am not oppressed with the desire that animates some of us to share our knowledge or optimism with you all before the time. You know who feels like that but I am content that you should wait. The solution of the Great Problem I could not give you—I am still very far from it. . . .

So, occasionally, but not often, we find the dead telling the truth. "The solution of the Great Problem I could not give you—I am still very far from it." As indeed they are so long as they are intent upon being individuals instead of *being*.

Yet the various phases of the greater whole must not be ridiculed: "Mankind comes to Me along many roads, and on whatever road a man comes, on that road do I welcome him, for all roads are Mine."

Indeed! Even the road of Science. Time and space are about to fall: witness, Einstein!

It is clear enough that we civilized have surrendered to our civilization. It is tragically true that buildings have meant more to us as commercial temples than as houses for the soul; we have valued inventions and machines higher than meditation, for our ambitions have run away with us. We know not what we do.

And yet it is just possible that we do know what we do. We of to-day are in the center of the mechanical-mental-commercial civilization of our time. Yet we are in that center with an immense amount of potential energy, and we are just beginning to release it. In us the world has been reborn truly enough: we are its youth. We are making all the mistakes of youth, yet we are driving somewhere. And we are driving at a terrific pace. Before we finish, we will have tamed the universe. All of its physical power will be under our thumbs, at our instant command. Material success will be ours beyond the question of a doubt.

How about the other success? The spirit of Life—will we be able to harness that too? There is reason to believe that we will. "Cosmic consciousness" is a new thing in that man himself is a new thing, being only about one hundred thousand years old. It is as old as the hills because it is the

hills. But one fact is certain: that it is becoming more widespread. There have been something like eight complete cases of cosmic consciousness in the last six hundred years. In eighteen hundred years previous to that, from Gautama to the time of Dante, there were but five complete cases. At this rate, the boldly outstanding examples are four and eight-tenths times as frequent as they used to be.

Bucke looks with great optimism into the future:

All religions known and named to-day will be melted down. The human soul will be revolutionized. Religion will absolutely dominate the race. It will not depend on tradition. It will not be believed and disbelieved. It will not be a part of life, belonging to certain hours, times, occasions. It will not be in sacred books nor in the mouths of priests. It will not dwell in churches and meetings and forms and days. Its life will not be in prayers, hymns, nor discourses. It will not depend on special revelations, on the word of gods who came down to teach, nor on any bible or bibles. It will have no mission to save men from their sins or to secure them entrance to heaven. It will not teach a future immortality nor future glories, for immortality and all glory will exist in the here and now. The evidence of immortality will live in every heart as sight in every eye. Doubt of God and of eternal life will be as impossible as is now doubt of existence; the evidence of each will be the same. Religion will govern every minute of every day of all life. Churches, priests, forms, creeds, prayers, all agents, all intermediaries between the individual man and God, will be permanently replaced by direct and unmistakable intercourse. Sin will no longer exist, nor will salvation be desired. Man will not worry about death or a future, about the kingdom of heaven, about what may come with and after cessation of the life of the present body. Each soul will feel and know itself to be immortal, will feel and know that the entire universe with all its good and with all its beauty is for it, and belongs to it forever. The world peopled by men possessing cosmic consciousness will be as far removed from the world of to-day as this is from the world as it was before the advent of self consciousness.

And it is safe to assume that when that time comes, as it is coming surely, articles such as this one will no longer be written. . . .

ELWORTH POUND.